New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1949

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1949 PRODUCTIONS

Premiers in Other Years

Original Reviews Appeared In These Volumes

Stage Play	*Page*
1948 Vol.	
*Anne of the Thousand Days	128
*As the Girls Go	159
Don't Listen, Ladies	100
*Edward, My Son	214
*Goodbye My Fancy	152
Inside U.S.A.	279
Jenny Kissed Me	112
*Kiss Me, Kate	91
*Lend an Ear	122
*Life With Mother	182
*Light Up the Sky	148
*Love Life	201
*Madwoman of Chaillot (The)	104
Make Mine Manhattan	382
Make Way for Lucia	115
*Mister Roberts	338
My Romance	186
Oh, Mr. Meadowbrook!	108
*Private Lives	209
Rape of Lucretia (The)	95
*Red Gloves	132
*Silver Whistle (The)	139
Small Wonder	244
Summer and Smoke	205
*Where's Charley?	197
Young and Fair (The)	143
1947 Vol.	
*High Button Shoes	304
*Streetcar Named Desire (A)	249
1946 Vol.	
Annie Get Your Gun	382
*Born Yesterday	466
1944 Vol.	
Harvey	95

**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of February 28, 1949*

1949 PRODUCTIONS

Premieres During 1949

Reviews Appear in This Volume

Stage Play	*Page*
*All for Love	377
*Along Fifth Avenue	392
*Anybody Home	346
*Big Knife (The)	349
*Death of a Salesman	358
*Diamond Lil	369
Forward the Heart	374
Leaf and Bough	381
*My Name Is Aquilon	362
Richard III	365
Shop at Sly Corner (The)	386
Smile of the World (The)	396
*They Knew What They Wanted	354

Theatre Openings
"Anybody Home"
"The Big Knife"

**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of February 28, 1949*

Theatre Critics' Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York newspapers.

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK POST HOME NEWS
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES
NEW YORK SUN

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"Anybody Home"

DAILY NEWS
FEBRUARY 26, 1949

'Anybody Home' Has Its Premiere At Golden's Theatre, W. 45th St.

By JOHN CHAPMAN

At about 8:40 P. M. yesterday, at the John Golden Theatre, 252 W. 45th St., telephone CI. 6-6740, the curtain rose on a play titled "Anybody Home." An audience was present.

The play is described in the program as a romantic drama. The author is Robert Pyzel. The drama columns of the newspapers have stated that Mr. Pyzel is a chemical engineer and a former executive of a company which assisted in building the atom bomb plant at Oak Ridge, Tenn.

The producer and leading lady is Phyllis Holden. The drama columns of the newspapers have stated that Miss Holden is married to Mr. Pyzel. The theatre program further identifies Miss Holden as a former model who was the first Fisher Body Girl.

In the first act an actor dressed in brand new riding pants came into a room. The program states that this room, designed by Louis Kennel, is in a Westchester County, N. Y., country home. Through open doors at the rear there was a view of a range of mountains, the tallest hill looking like Mt. Rainier or Fujiyama without snow. There has been little snow in Westchester this Winter, and everything is growing much too soon.

Illicit Love.

The actor in the riding pants came to see Miss Holden, with whom he was in love. It was not right for him to be in love with this lady, for she was already married to another man. But the other man never came home very much, she said, because he was a lawyer.

During the action of the play the man in the riding pants once was alluded to as the playboy of Westchester County. The wife said she was bored doing nothing but keeping a house running. Her sister came for a visit and the playboy of Westchester County got her to put on another brand new pair of riding pants. The sister explained to the playboy that maybe the reason her sister—Miss Holden, that is—and her husband were a little strained at the moment was because the husband had fallen off a horse and killed their baby.

One or two servants served tea quite frequently.

Once, one of the sisters said about the other one, "Kay is a gay, delightful child." There was no direct evidence supporting this testimony.

Plenty Ice Cubes.

The Westchester County house not only had the best view this side of the Wasatch Mountains, but also was very efficient. The hostess could take an empty ice bucket into the kitchen and come back with the bucket full before the door stopped swinging. This is very difficult in most houses in Westchester County, where ice trays always stick in the refrigerator and have to be defrosted after they are yanked out. Defrosting takes time because the hot water never runs hot right away.

Toward the end of the first act the husband came home, and he and the man in the riding pants who was in love with his wife had a long talk about Capital and Labor. Then the man in the riding pants said, "It's getting later and later. I've got to run along."

'ANYBODY HOME'

Play by Robert Pyzel; staged by Ralph Forbes; setting by Louis Kennel; presented by Phyllis Holden at the John Golden Theatre, February 25, 1949. The cast:

Franklin.....Jimmy Dutton
Joah.....Emeroy Richardson
Bill Gordon.....Roger Clark
Kay Howard.....Phyllis Holden
Julia Henley..Katherine Anderson
Harry.....Lloyd Holden
Taylor.....Valerie Valaire
John Howard.....Donald Curtis

Synopsis: The action takes place in John and Kay Howard's country home in Westchester County, N.Y. The time is the present. Act I. Scene 1-Late afternoon a Sunday in August. Scene 2-Late afternoon Tuesday. Act II. Scene 1-Early evening, Wednesday. Scene 2-Late that night and early Thursday morning.

At the end of the first act a reporter from The News named Chapman said to nobody in particular, "It's getting later and later. I've got to run along." He brought his program back to the office, and it said that the actors included Jimmy Dutton, Emory Richardson, Roger Clark, Katherine Anderson and Donald Curtis, and that Ralph Forbes was the director. The reporter wrote his impersonal report and sent it down to the composing room. By this time it was too late for him to go back to the John Golden Theatre and see what happened in the second and last act.

The Sun
FEBRUARY 26, 1949

By WARD MOREHOUSE

No Play at the Golden.

There were people in the John Golden Theater last night, including critics and some friends and relatives of members of the cast. Mrs. Katzenberg was missing, but the gentlemen of the press were in their accustomed places. The Harvard man sat two rows ahead of me. Cornell's representative was across the aisle, and the University of Cincinnati alumnus was in Row AA. It was the first night of "Anybody Home."

The curtain went up at 8:37. There was scenery upon the stage, and a few emphatic actors, but no play. Eight Equity members went through the motions of playing Robert Pyzel's little drama about the domestic strife of Kay and John Howard, who live in suburban Westchester. Those of us who were tenaciously present at the finish can testify that the Howards effected a final-curtain reconciliation, and after a fairly distressing time of it. Their misery was definitely communicable.

If you want to be blunt about it, "Anybody Home" is a sappy and doltish piece of nothing at all. The dialogue is childish, the acting is uninhibited, the direction routine. Pick any manuscript from any tottering pile on any managerial desk in New York and give it professional presentation and it would hardly subject playgoers to the unrelieved boredom that was their fate last evening at the Golden.

Of course, the observation should be made that ratings on gimcrack drama change from month to month and from season to season. "Hairpin Harmony," a delicacy of a few seasons ago, seemed to be the theater's all-time low. Then along came such exhibits as "Heads or Tails," "The Odds On Mrs. Oakley" and "Grandma's Diary," which will always have its swarm of loyal supporters.

But my new candidate for the worst-play-ever-produced-on-any-stage honors is this new "Anybody Home." It was the winner last night in two acts and four scenes. "Grandma's Diary" was on the floor for the full count at 10:42.

The New York Times
FEBRUARY 26, 1949

Homelife in Westchester

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Although "Anybody Home" is obviously well meant, there is no escaping its quality. As produced laughingly at the John Golden last evening, it is an uncommonly sorry drama about some sorry Westchester people wallowing in expensive family trouble. Robert Pyzel, a chemical engineer, has written it. His wife, Phyllis Holden, is carrying the main burden of his woe in the chief part, which is full of suffering.

There has seldom been a play in which the characters have inquired more solicitously after the health of other characters off-stage. How's John? How's Bill? How's father? And, by golly, you hear the answers. The general state of the health seems to be pretty good, in case you are interested. At any rate, it is better than Mr. Pyzel's earnest study of family maladjustment in sightly Westchester County.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

FEBRUARY 26, 1949

= By HOWARD BARNES =

Everybody Ho-hum

THE DRAMA has taken a considerationable beating at the John Golden Theater. Rarely has an inept script been coupled with such maladroit acting as it is in "Anybody Home." Robert Pyzel, the author of this unseemly charade, has seen fit to call it a romantic drama. Most of the romance involves a suburban matron, contemplating adultery with a fellow known as a Westchester playboy. The drama is virtually non-existent. Several characters whom one would go miles to avoid, sit around a living room and chat interminably about morals, ethics, political economy and off-stage parties. They make this Phyllis Holden production a bore of the first magnitude.

* * *

The show is something of a family affair. Pyzel is Miss Holden's husband, who has something of a reputation as a chemical engineer, but should have taken considerably more time in studying his avocation. Miss Holden plays the leading role of the neglected wife, who gradually loses her wits moving furniture around while her husband is involved in a lucrative law practice. Meanwhile Miss Holden's brother, Lloyd, has a hand in the tedious proceedings. They are all equally to blame for one of the most dismal exhibits which has made its way to Broadway in recent times.

The producer and leading woman has been on the stage before, but it is hard to believe it after watching her portrayal in "Anybody Home." She has a couple of weeping fits which are as spurious as Confederate shinplasters. Most of the time she merely talks and talks. Roger Clark tries to be dashing as her young suitor, who swaggers around in riding clothes; Donald Curtis brings a minimum of conviction to the part of the spouse, and Katherine Anderson plays an older sister with all the monotony of a metronome. Emory Richardson, as a Negro butler, is the only character in the work who makes a bit of sense. The Ralph Forbes direction has not aided a wretched play at any point. "Anybody Home" finds the theater at very low tide.

Daily Mirror

FEBRUARY 26, 1949

'Anybody Home' at Golden Is Amateurish Play

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Robert Pyzel is one of our eminent industrial engineers, but he most certainly will not gain stature as an eminent playwright with "Anybody Home," which opened at the John Golden Theatre last evening. Pyzel is evidently a man who, when he leaves his business office, does considerable thinking along many lines.

As a result, he has formed conclusions on such topics as politics, the state of the union, marital relations, etc., and apparently is anxious to share them with others. But we believe he has chosen the wrong medium.

"Anybody Home" is essentially an essay on the problems of modern civilization, tailored arbitrarily into an awkward, tedious and undramatic stage piece. It is a debate rather than a play.

His chief debaters are John Howard, a lawyer, and Bill Gordon, a playboy. John believes in the American way, prefers achievement to frivolity and would swap a batch of abstract pamtings for an old master any day. Bill thinks there is something in Communism, likes to play the social butterfly and has abominable taste when it comes to interior decorating.

John's shallow wife, Kay, finds Bill glamorous, and John a stuffed shirt. All three come out of the wringer a dull and half-baked lot. Anyway, Pyzel brings about an understanding between John and Kay by the final curtain, which seemed to take an interminable time to fall.

"Anybody Home" seems to pose a question. Frankly we wish we had been at home last evening. It would have been more pleasant and rewarding. We really took a terrific drubbing at the John Golden Theatre, at the hands of a well-meaning but amateurish author.

New York World-Telegram

FEBRUARY 26, 1949

'Anybody Home' Gets Lost Mulling Over Lost Wife

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"Anybody Home" deserves a prize of some sort for ingenious ineptitude. Styled a "romantic drama," it is boring when it tries to be intellectual and embarrassing when it tries to be emotional.

This domestic schism concerns a wife of that distracted school who has nothing to do but redecorate her house. As a result she is lost. This is a frequent statement of her own, which every other member of the cast reiterates.

One of the Chosen.

Her husband is a pompous lawyer convinced that his elemental theories about capital and labor set him apart as one of the few chosen to save the world. Left alone on the stage toward the end of the play for ten minutes that seem like an hour, he apparently gets religion. Just why this is going to make his wife happy no one explains.

There is a competent bachelor girl in the family, the wife's sister, and a boy named Bill in the neighborhood. As might be expected, Bill is considered something of a wolf, although he seems to be the last person to whom this occurs. Secondarily he is accused of undermining the wife's morale with his liberal ideas and cursed as a radical by the husband. This seems far fetched as his only faint expressed interest in the working class is in connection with the grooms who saddle his horses and butlers who mix him drinks.

This excursion into a misunderstanding is related with an exhaustive series of platitudes, before which the actors are constantly trying not to flinch.

Sensational thespians could do little in the face of this script, and these ordinary mortals do less. Allowing for the contrast with her associates, one can at least state that Katherine Anderson, as the sister, looked and behaved as if she was healthy, normal and happy.

Journal-American
FEBRUARY 28, 1949

'Anybody Home' Had Best Be Forgotten

By ROBERT GARLAND

As a more macrobiotic member of our Drama Critics Circle, the one who saw "Anybody Home" all the way through over the last weekend, let me make known what happened to John, Kay and Bill at the Golden Theatre after my less durable fellow-members deserted Robert Pyzel's sinking (I quote) romantic drama (unquote).

John, the husband, returns. He finds Kay, the wife, in the arms of Bill, the dastard. So irked is John that he accuses Kay and Bill of deceiving him beneath his nose and behind his back. Bill, realizing the awkwardness of that position, lies like the Westchester County playboy he is supposed to be.

John goes his way. Kay goes her way. Bill goes the way of Julia, Kay's sexier sister. Enter Uncle Joah. Old family retainer of Massa John and Missey Kay, he worships them. So, opening the not-too-French French windows of their unhappy home, he recites the Twenty-third psalm as the sun comes up beyond Mt. Kisco.

And at dawning, on that lush mid-Summer day, a musical cigaret box plays "Holy Night" on the cocktail table at which John sits, brooding. Through the sunrise and the melody, Kay steals softly to him in a nightgown by Lentheric, Inc. It is then that they, poor John and careless Kay, decide to live unhappily ever after...

Bill, the dastard? He has already taken Julia, the sexy, over the hill to White Plains with him.

* * *

All's Forgotten

Emery Richard, because of his Uncle Joah, and Roger Clark, in spite of his Bill, are worth remembering. The others, and Ralph Forbes' major misdirection, are best forgotten. Forgotten along with "Anybody Home" itself, which goes down deeper, stays down longer and comes up drier than even a "romantic drama" should.

New York Post
HOME NEWS
FEBRUARY 27, 1949

One Way for a Drama Critic To Waste His Friday Night

By Richard Watts Jr.

When veteran drama critics foregather, the talk is certain to get around eventually to the worst play they have ever experienced. The discussion is likely to be heated and eloquent, with one reviewer insisting that his favorite atrocity was the most punishing stage exhibit in history, while others hold out for some alternate exercise in theatrical anguish. In such debates, the dramas that used to open in the prewar years at the now forgotten chamber of horrors called the Nora Bayes Theatre are considered out of bounds, and the sensitive magazine critics who flee at the end of the first act are scorned as weaklings by the hardy newspaper reviewers who sweat out the disasters to the remorseless end.

It takes the perspective of history to make one appreciate the absolute standards of bad plays, and so I will not state dogmatically that "Anybody Home," which opened at the John Golden Friday night, provided the worst evening I have ever spent in a theatre. After all, men with happily short memories can recall such things as "Grandma's Diary" and "For Heaven's Sake, Mother!" In the intermediate distance, there were such abominations as "The Girl from Nantucket" and "Hairpin Harmony," and those with the total recall attributed to elephants may even go back to a prehistoric melodrama known as "One Shot Fired."

But, when the historians who specialize in the annals of the damned write their chapter on the theatre of our day, they will do well to consider "Anybody Home." I had planned to devote this weekend sermon to some afterthoughts on "Death of a Salesman," if you will forgive me for mentioning the two plays in the same paragraph, but even the stunning Arthur Miller drama, which I am still unable to get out of my mind, must wait for further contemplation while a few horrible details concerning "Anybody Home" are set down. For, in its own repulsive way, it is almost equally historic to those of us who survived it.

Domestic Drama

Well, "Anybody Home" is the work of one Robert Pyzel, and it was produced by the author's wife, Phyllis Holden who also plays what is probably its leading role. It is, I take it, a domestic drama, dealing with a restless wife, her stuffy husband, the dashing bachelor who almost breaks up the home, and the understanding sister who tries to straighten out things with her homely philosophy. As such, it goes its customary way, with the customary complications and the customary solution. But Mr. Pyzel, being a dramatist with lofty ambitions, was not satisfied to write just a dull and conventional play. Not Mr. Pyzel.

What chiefly sets his work apart from the run of such exhibits is its passion for culture and the social sciences. The characters, not content with their personal problems, always have time on their hands to contemplate life and letters, and they are never too upset to share with us the fruits of their wisdom. Labor and capital, the welfare state and free enterprise, communism, democracy and the fifth column, modern art, idealism and the blindness of the practical man, society and the home, and the works of Arnold Toynbee—all of these important matters are close to the heart of the playwright, and it can be safely reported that he hasn't a fresh word to say about any of them.

Even Henry Wallace

Among its many curious qualities, "Anybody Home" is the only play of the season to use the name of poor Henry Wallace to bring about what I suppose is its climax. The embattled husband and wife are discussing their estrangement quietly and urbanely enough until the wife mentions that the young whippersnapper who loves her is a supporter of Wallace. At that point, the husband, who had been amusedly tolerant of the activities of the home-wrecker, gets into a violent rage, staggers drunkenly from his house into the rain in the dead of night, and only comes to himself after indulging in a monologue longer than any of Hamlet's.

That monologue, which is quite a gem of dullness, provides the play with its fitting conclusion, but then almost everything about the evening is fitting. The acting, for example. It is something of a feat for a company of actors to be as awkward as "Anybody Home," but these hapless but gallant thespians somehow accomplish it. But at least there is one cause for gratitude. There is a great deal of admiring talk about the heroine's father, who is regarded as a philosopher with a singularly beautiful soul and who must have been one of the epic bores of his time, but fortunately he never appears in this celebration of the stage's Black Friday.

"The Big Knife"

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

FEBRUARY 25, 1949

= By HOWARD BARNES =

With a Dull Edge

CLIFFORD ODETS has returned to playwriting with a tangled melodrama of Hollywood doings, of which he has been a somewhat intimate spectator. His "The Big Knife," at the National has passages of acute observation, more than a little venomous caricature, and meditative asides about the general state of the world. Were it not for the fact that John Garfield plays the starring role with tremendous intensity and conviction, it would be a sorry dramatic hodge-podge. The actor has never been finer as the ill-fated screen idol of the work. His sensitive performing does not save it from tedium and confusion.

* * *

The author has employed a specious premise to spring his savage indictment of film-making. According to "The Big Knife," a high-salaried screen star is driven into separation from his wife, the signing of an onerous contract and eventual suicide by a hushed-up scandal, in which he permitted his press agent to go to jail on a homicide charge of which he was guilty. The violence, including the proposed murder of a witness to the crime, leads to moments of tortured excitement, but it vitiates the essential account of nonsense in the factory of dreams. The motion picture industry would have been damned far more effectively had Odets concentrated on the destruction of a valorous man's integrity by a ruthless studio head and his minions.

* * *

Garfield has realized the core of the show brilliantly. His scenes with a wife whom he still loves have a curiously tender quality. His stubborn resistance to a producer who thinks of him only as a piece of merchandise are splendidly modulated straight through to an explosive but inconclusive climax. Here is a portrayal that is well worth witnessing, for all the verbose and scrambled meanderings of the script. With J. Edward Bromberg contributing a terrifying portrait of a movie tycoon, the promise of a pertinent tragedy is always present in "The Big Knife." It grows dimmer and dimmer through three acts.

* * *

There is little of the old Odets eloquence in his new drama. Passages of the dialogue are downright ridiculous, while his attempt to link Hollywood and a desperate point in history is woefully unsuccessful. Lee Strasberg has staged the production painstakingly against a striking Howard Bay setting, but he has not been able to keep an unkempt work in a tidy theatrical frame. Nancy Kelly plays the star's wife. Paul McGrath, Reinhold Schunzel, Theodore Newton and Joan McCracken are among the other supporting players. Garfield has expended genuine artistry to little avail in "The Big Knife."

'THE BIG KNIFE'

Play by Clifford Odets; staged by Lee Strasberg; setting by Howard Bay; costumes by Lucille Little; presented by Dwight Deere Wiman at the National Theatre, February 24, 1949. The cast:

Russell.....Frank Wilson
Buddy Bliss.....William Terry
Charlie Castle....John Garfield
Patty Benedict....Leona Powers
Marion Castle.....Nancy Kelly
Nat Danziger..Reinhold Schunzel
Marcus Hoff..J.Edward Bromberg
Smiley Coy.....Paul McGrath
Connie Bliss.....Mary Patton
Hank Teagle...Theodore Newton
Dixie Evans....Joan McCracken
Dr. Frary.....John McKee

Synopsis: The action takes place in the playroom of Charlie Castle's Beverly Hills house, in the present day. Act I. A summer afternoon. Act II. Late one night, the following week. Act III. Scene 1-Afternoon four days later. Scene 2-An hour later.

Journal American

FEBRUARY 25, 1949

An Over-Produced And Overwritten Play

By ROBERT GARLAND

Everything about "The Big Knife" is superior to what "The Big Knife" is about. Neither Clifford Odets' playwriting, John Garfield's playacting nor Dwight Deere Wiman's play-producing succeeds in making the new arrival at the National more than showy, superficial and Hollywooden stage stuff.

I am sure that, as a reformed scenarist who has frankly acknowledged the error of his ways, Mr. Odets has given "The Big Knife" the best that remains in him. I am also sure that, as a reformed screen actor openly in search of his pre-West Coast third dimension, Mr. Garfield is also up on his mettle.

And I know that, as a legitimate producer who believes sincerely in Playwright Odets' and Playactor Garfield's conceded reformations, Mr. Wiman has, as the former's play and the latter's vehicle, given "The Big Knife" the best he and the East Coast have to offer in the way of cast, costume and background.

Yet, in spite of all these things, Clifford Odets' first off-screen scripting in the eight years since "Clash by Night" lived up to its title, remains an overwritten, overacted, over-produced play about nobody in particular, a much ado about the Charlie Castle who never seems to come to life and matter.

This moody, muddled movie man is what "The Big Knife" is about. And everything about "The Big Knife" is superior to him. He is so sorry for himself that you never feel called upon to feel sorry for him. Not I, at any rate!

Great Big Star

Charlie Castle is, they tell you, a great big star in Hollywood. You meet him in the great big playroom of his great big house in the great big Beverly Hills of California. A Georges Rouault is on the wall. A dice-cage is on the mantle. A drink-bar is in the corner. A hoot-owl is in the patio.

In spite or because of these Hollywooden necessities, plus a picture projector, a record player, a winding staircase, a colored houseman, a white yes-man, a lovey wife, a dovey girl-friend, a loyal boy-friend, an adoring public and a golden contract just about to be renewed, Charlie is hideously unhappy.

As cut from cardboard by Playwright Odets and pushed around by Playactor Garfield, he is full of sound and fury, signifying nothing that you and I can reach out cooperatively and put our hands on. Nothing, perhaps, but that Clifford and John are sore at Hollywood and trying to get even.

So when the Charlie Castle you do not believe in, the great big Hollywood star who does not believe in himself, either, becomes too plottishly involved with a Hollywood agent, a Hollywood producer, a Hollywood hussy and a Hollywood killing, you find it impossible to believe in these other things as well.

And when, at too long last, Charles ascends that winding staircase to slash his wrists and then drown himself to make sure, it leaves you clear-eyed and unmoved. I suppose it should not. But I know it does.

Works Long, Hard

John Garfield works long, hard and overmuch in an effort to bring a third dimension to the Charlie Castle who, quite obviously, has not got one. Yet, during the three acts and four scenes at the National, the moody, muddled movie man continues steadily to get away from him. At the end, he is gone.

Nobody, not you, not I, not Mr. Odets, not Mr. Garfield, knows what Charlie Castle wants. Except that he wants to eat his Hollywood and have it, too. For this he, as created by the playwright and projected by the player, is alone to blame. Charlie would be moody, muddled and maddening anywhere.

To look at, to listen to, Charlie's surrounding Hollywooders feel the same way about him. Not knowing what he wants, either, they let him have his way and say his say as much as possible. Particularly helpful are Nancy Kelly as his lovey wife and Joan McCracken as a hussy with a one-track mind.

Edward Bromberg, a pre-West Coast co-worker with Mr. Garfield, gives a studied picture of the Marcus Hoff who is given another name out in the auditorium. And, as Nat Danziger of the broken English, Reinhold Schunzel is also recognized and relished. Paul McGrath is a smiley Smiley Coy.

Lee Strasberg has directed all this and those with more relish than restraint. He, along with Clifford Odets and John Garfield, approaches "The Big Knife" as if it were "The Big Grudge." It could be!

The New York Times

FEBRUARY 25, 1949

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Since Clifford Odets feels deeply about nearly everything, "The Big Knife" fairly snaps with emotion. Mr. Odets says that Hollywood is an evil place. With John Garfield at the head of an enthralling group of players, "The Big Knife" opened up the National Theatre last evening, and Mr. Odets revealed some of Hollywood's most monstrous abominations.

This column dislikes being found wanting in a good moral crusade. But the characters in "The Big Knife" are not worth so much of Mr. Odets' indignation on so comic a plane. As in a soundly motivated melodrama, they get what they deserve in the last act. There is no point in crying doom for the entire nation.

* * *

To Mr. Odets' "The Big Knife" seems to be a study of the immorality of success measured solely in terms of money; and he is showing how the conspiracy of money destroys those who work for it. A colossal star who began as an idealist faces a dilemma. His wife, who is disillusioned by the man he has become, threatens to leave him if he signs a contract for fourteen more years in Hollywood. If he does not sign, his studio, which needs him, will turn him over to the police for a crime his bosses have managed to conceal by bribery and paying blackmail. The star signs. Mr. Odets proceeds to show how one crime gets piled on another until everyone is corrupted and the whole edifice topples over in a crash of scandal and disaster.

* * *

He is not content to play it straight. Always a vivid writer, he has put together a whole company of authentic individual people, characterizing them brilliantly and displaying them in a series of actable scenes. Although Mr. Odets has a fondness for purple passages, his characters are living people, and what they do and most of what they say in individual scenes are both plausible and electric.

But Mr. Odets is more effective with individual scenes than with the play as a whole for two reasons. In the first place, he refuses to construct his play simply. He writes in picturesque circumlocutions all around his theme, bouncing startling phrases off it but seldom coming to the point. The drama coyly dawdles on one foot or the other, and declines to march straight forward until well into the last act.

* * *

In the second place, Mr. Odets ascribes more significance to his drama than his characters can sustain. To him this Hollywood jungle is a great moral tragedy, and he quotes one or two fancy phrases to prove it. But his characters are a singularly undistinguished and unattractive society of egotists, racketeers, cheats and dimwits. It is impossible to be harrowed when they knock themselves and each other out. It could happen just as logically in the first act as the last.

In honor of the performance, this report will be more cheerful. For Lee Strasberg, working in a minor key, has designed a beautiful performance that has spontaneity and tension at the same time. Although he does not force it, it is never colorless or tepid.

* * *

As the troubled star, Mr. Garfield gives an interestingly moody performance that can be tremendously powerful at the crucial moment. J. Edward Bromberg plays the charlatan producer with considerable insight into the part. Although the producer is fatuous, he is also shrewd and smart. There is a pleasantly loyal and paternal agent by Reinhold Schunzel. Paul McGrath as an unctuous crook, Theodore Newton as a gentlemanly writer, William Terry as an affable but futile friend, Frank Wilson as a kindly servant and John McKee as a slightly acerbic doctor from next door—all give excellent performances.

The women's parts are well played also. As the star's bewildered wife, Nancy Kelly brings a soft and somber beauty into a slimy environment. Joan McCracken skillfully acts a star-dazzled trollope, and Mary Patton is agreeably alluring as a neighborly adultress. Leona Powers begins the story with a chilling portrait of a gossip columnist.

* * *

Like the acting, the production is admirable work. Howard Bay's sketch of an imposing basement rumpus room is massive enough to convey the ominous note in the drama. And Lucille Little's costumes are brightly contrived. There is a lot of distinguished art and craftsmanship in "The Big Knife." In its characters and episodes it is a cheering reminder of Mr. Odets' uncommon theatre talents.

But as Emerson remarked on looking at the stars: "Why so hot, little man?" Under the stress of fiery emotions, Mr. Odets has overreached himself.

DAILY NEWS

FEBRUARY 25, 1949

Odets Cuts Hollywood, Garfield His Veins in 'Big Knife'; No Blood

By JOHN CHAPMAN

At the end of quite a long time at the National Theatre last evening, John Garfield went up the spiral stair of his Beverly Hills home to take a bath. Pretty soon water came down through the ceiling and Frank Wilson, Paul McGrath and Nancy Kelly went up to see what was wrong. Then they came down and said Mr. Garfield had killed himself with a razor. That's what they said—but I won't be surprised if the coroner finds out that Mr. Garfield expired quite gently, having talked himself to death.

The occasion for the passing of Mr. Garfield is Clifford Odets' new drama about Hollywood, "The Big Knife." In it Mr. Odets is very serious about the movies, which is a commendable switch from the usual fast-talking comedy on filmland. "The Big Knife" also is commendable for some quite profound characterizations of screenland people and for a few really funny lines like "A woman with six martinis can ruin a city."

To continue on the praiseful side, the players mentioned above, plus J. Edward Bromberg, John McGrath, Joan McCracken, Theodore Newton and others give producer Dwight Deere Wiman a good run for his money, and Howard Bay's setting of a screen star's rumpus room is excellent.

Slave Labor.

But it's a rumpus room with no rumpus. Mr. Odets obviously is full of things to say about the deadening influence of Hollywood and he tries his sober best to make me feel sorry for a poor slob like Garfield who is chained to a studio for a fourteen-year contract and $3,400,000 when he really wants to Get Away From It All and Amount to Something. But I just couldn't feel sorry for John last evening because he never did get around to explaining just what it was he wanted to do that would have made him Amount.

You'd think it would be easy to break a $3,400,000 contract if you really got sore, but you don't know Mr. Odets' Hollywood. It seems that Garfield was drunk with a babe in a car once and killed a child. Studio fixers fixed it for a loyal publicity man to take the rap and serve ten months in prison. Every time Garfield gets fed up, which is practically always for three acts, he is reminded that if he isn't a good boy the studio will snitch on him and he will have to go to jail.

Bromberg Excels.

Furthermore, Garfield is having wife trouble, which is the most rampant social disease north, south and west of Burbank, Calif. A shame, too, for Miss Kelly is as fine a wife as you ever saw, except that she's never very cheerful. And women like Miss McCracken and Mary Patton are always making passes at him. I don't know—maybe he did cut himself, at that.

Mr. Bromberg gives the best performance of the evening as a studio mogul who is as cold and brutal and hellish as Richard III. Mr. Odets' characters all struck me as being pretty accurate — the fixers, agents and hangers-on—but Lee Strasberg's direction doesn't make them any too lively and I never did figure out what direction Mr. Odets was going. He just says Hollywood dulls the mind and I guess he's right.

New York Post
HOME NEWS
FEBRUARY 25, 1949

An Untriumphant War Against Hollywood

By RICHARD WATTS JR.

Clifford Odets has returned from his long Hollywood meditations a very angry man, and the result of his embittered brooding is "The Big Knife," an irate melodrama about high skulduggery in the cinema citadel, which opened last night at the National Theatre. Mr. Odets still writes with traces of his old-time power and eloquence, but it is greatly to be feared that Los Angeles' most famous suburb has avenged itself upon him for his dislike by infecting his dramaturgy with some of its own frailties. Despite the excellent work of John Garfield and a good cast, "The Big Knife" is overwrought and oddly hollow.

Although his tale is broadly melodramatic, it is not what Mr. Odets has to say, but his manner of saying it, that is seriously at fault. I, for one, am willing to believe that every shady incident and loathsome character, from the scheme to murder a troublesome extra girl to the megalomaniac producer and the nasty woman columnist, which the playwright offers in his indictment, is based on actuality. Indeed, I suspect that I have a pretty fair idea as to the identity of two or three of his targets. The great trouble is that everything is so heavily contrived that it is hardly ever believable.

Aid to Enemy

In the end, the most painful aspect of the play's weakness is, less the melancholy evidence it offers that one of the American theatre's most arresting talents is not yet himself again, than the aid and comfort it is likely to afford those sensitive defenders of Hollywood's good name, Louella Parsons and Hedda Hopper. For the homecoming dramatist, who set out to put the film capital in its ugly place, stumps his toe embarrassingly, just as he is about to give the enemy a resounding kick. The anger in "The Big Knife" keeps it from being a bore, but that is the best that can be said of it.

That Hollywood is a lavish mantrap which wrecks talent and character, destroys values and taste, and encourages the most unscrupulous ruthlessness is a charge that needs very little proof at this late date. When Mr. Odets is showing the conniving through which men and women are blackmailed, corrupted and even murdered at the whim of big-shot cinema magnates, his tale may be lurid, but it is by no means impossible to believe him. Where I found him at his most implausible was in his picture of an idealistic actor, the hero of his story, who kills himself rather than be subjected to 14 years more of luxurious peonage.

Mr. Garfield

Because John Garfield plays the actor with his characteristic forthrightness, candor and attractive earnestness, the role does manage to take on life and sympathy, but essentially the portrait that Odets has provided is far from credible. It is not that a number of Hollywood actors, including Mr. Garfield, have somehow managed to maintain their integrity through pretty successful screen careers. The trouble is that the playwright has given both characters and plot a contrived and unreal air that makes even his truth assume the quality of fable. Nor is his effort to present Hollywood as merely part of a picture of general American confusion of soul properly successful.

In the incompletely written role of the wife who serves as her actor-husband's conscience, Nancy Kelly understandably has her troubles, but, in general, the acting is excellent. J. Edward Bromberg and Paul McGrath, as the sinister movie magnate and his ruthless hatchet man, are particularly effective. Reinhold Schunzel, as the star's well-meaning manager, provides valuable assistance, and Joan McCracken has a moving and completely believable scene as a pathetic little Hollywood stray. The rest of the cast is highly helpful, and so is Howard Bay's set. But "The Big Knife" is exasperatingly disappointing.

The Sun
FEBRUARY 25, 1949

By WARD MOREHOUSE

Odets's Worst: 'The Big Knife.'

Clifford Odets, who has served the drama valiantly, returned to combat duty on the Broadway front last night with the submission of "The Big Knife," perhaps the worst play of his career. Dwight Deere Wiman makes the presentation at the National.

"The Big Knife" is a plotty and weighty hodgepodge, a play that wallows in its own verbiage. A cumbersome and muddled drama, it presents moments of tension and excitement, but also offers some of the most bewilderingly pretentious dialogue heard upon the New York stage in years. The author of "Awake and Sing" and "Golden Boy" is singularly off form at the National.

Whether or not Odets has intended "The Big Knife" as a blasting attack upon the West Coast or as an expression of his views of the Hollywood way of life, his new play is one with a movie-colony locale. Its characters are people of the screen, and its overpowering lack of conviction must be put down as the work of a dramatist who has been away from the theater too long.

In "The Big Knife" Odets presents the case of the idealistic Charlie Castle, a big-time film star, who is blackmailed by the studio boss into signing a fourteen-year contract. When Castle was driving his car one night with a young trollop, Dixie Evans, at his side he ran over and killed a child. The accident is hushed up. Another man is paid to take the blame and serve a jail term, and Dixie is given a studio contract for her silence.

It's later, when the troublesome Dixie gets to drinking and to talking, that murder is considered and actually planned. The star's reputation must be maintained and the studio's investment protected. Castle, revolted by the notion, turns in all his fury upon the great Marcus Hoff, studio magnate. Finally, and notwithstanding reconciliation with his wife, the agonized actor sees but one way of finding his freedom. So ends another drama in the suicide of its principal character.

Odets, for all of his vehemence, never makes his play believable. "The Big Knife" comes forth as the work of a dramatist with an honest indignation, but in presenting Hollywood as a snare and a pitfall he reveals defects as a writer and as a craftsman not to be expected from one of his accomplishments in other years.

Lee Strasberg has staged "The Big Knife" with an apparent faith in all that it says and tries to say, and John Garfield, with his intense and resourceful playing, does more for the character of the tormented Castle than the author did. Nancy Kelly has considerable difficulty in making anything at all of the role of the irresolute wife, the worst part in the play.

Paul McGrath, an expert actor, plays the sly and slimy Smiley Coy, and J. Edward Bromberg appears as the vicious and ruthless studio boss, and they contribute fascinating performances. Joan McCracken is extraordinarily good as the tragic, desperate and pushed-around Dixie Evans, a character familiar to those who know Hollywood. Dixie is definitely created from life. Leona Powers is excellent as a famous gossip writer. Reinhold Schunzel, Theodore Newton, Mary Patton, Frank Wilson and John McKee are others engaged in the invalid proceedings at the National. The realistic setting by Howard Bay has the genuine Hollywood look.

"The Big Knife" is overwrought and overwritten, a play with enough plot and sub-plot for an old-time Bowery thriller. There were moments last night when it seemed very close to being one.